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# Our education system works internationally

MY VIEW -  
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**ON** the sidelines of the Sarajevo Business Forum last week, I visited a few universities in the Bosnian capital. This “internationalisation” is now part of the mission of many universities. I have some difficulty accepting this and have for long envisaged that internationalisation was a “construct” created to serve a western-centric agenda.

“Internationalisation” has been around for a long time. The ambience of University of Penang (as USM was initially known) was “international” compared to what it is now.

Come to think of it, so was my school in Kuala Kangsar (fashioned after a British residential school). Its students benefited immensely without having “internationalisation” forced upon them. It was part of “education”. So what is the big deal today?

The agenda now is more about economics and less about education. Higher education institutions globally are under real economic threat, which has forced them out of their comfort zone.

Two factors matter: the demographic shift in most industrialised countries that all along have been writing the rules for the so-called “world-class” model based on some industrial provincial structure; second, the challenge against the prevalent “colonised” (western-centric) mindsets with their own biased understanding of “education” in contrast to the ancient non-western civilisations.

Here, “internationalisation” has been tainted by subtle hegemonic one-size-fits-all myopia that the entire academic world has come to accept. Many have even adopted the mantra that it is here to stay! This is where the conversation with my counterpart at the University of Sarajevo, an iconic university in Europe, vindicated me.

It began when the subject of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad as a recipient of an honorary degree from the university was raised. It was in recognition of his immense contribution to “internationalisation”.

It was made abundantly clear that Mahathir, when he was the fourth prime minister, contributed much to the current emerging leadership of Bosnia and Herzegovina through sheer guts and wisdom.

This opinion is shared by almost all who had had their education in Malaysia at a critical point when their homeland was ravaged by war.

Terrorism was not a fashionable word then but it was just that, some likened it to Hitler’s Germany. Europe and the West in general, stood by and watched for most of the time. The genocide in Srebrenica (under UN mandate then) was enough testimony for the world to recall and ponder.

In contrast, Mahathir took the bull by the horns. He focused on “education” to “equip” Bosnia and Herzegovina not only at that time of its greatest need but until today.

The Bosnian experience showed that the Malaysian education system works “internationally” – and makes a difference.

Each of those who “studied” in Malaysia went back to rebuild the war devastated country.

This was the eye-opening observation highlighted by my counterpart. He called it “brain gain”, which made the point how Malaysia truly “internationalised” education to assist Bosnia and Herzegovina gain a footing bolstered by the flow of brain power made-in-Malaysia.

This was in contrast to the European experience where such flowback was generally impeded, ironically.

During the war much of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s human resources were lost due to the inaction of the West; and in peacetime similar consequences have been felt.

This time, Bosnia and Herzegovina has to endure massive “brain drain” as most of its talents were “retained” in contrast to Malaysia’s policy of “prosper thy neighbour” that encourages foreign students to return home. Many countries tend to “beggar thy neighbour” in serving their self-interest first; so much for “internationalisation”.

All these are conveniently subsumed under the broad construct of “internationalisation” as an economic, if not political (hegemonic) agenda.

If this is apparent for a European country like Bosnia and Herzegovina, imagine the impact on other non-European countries. Given what Bosnia received from Malaysia through education, it is time to revisit what education has been made to be, under the pretext of so-called “internationalisation” as a “new” form of protectionism unsuspectingly.

*With some four decades of experience in education, the writer believes that “another world is possible”. Comments: [letters@thesundaily.com](mailto:letters@thesundaily.com)*